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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement by the International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

1. For the past 225 years, the members of the International Presentation Association have been engaged in primary, secondary, tertiary and community education. Additionally, during the last three decades, the 2,400 members of the Association in 22 countries have prioritized the needs of vulnerable people in various other ways besides education, particularly for women and girls, both in developed and less developed countries.[1]

2. Some of the newer initiatives are: caring for homeless people; working among migrant communities and with refugees and asylum-seekers; celebrating indigenous cultures to promote harmony; facilitating small neighbourhood participatory structures for people to engage in decisions that affect their lives; organizing people, especially women, into self-help groups to achieve economic and political empowerment; engaging women in non-formal education, ensuring leadership skills and sustainable development; implementing innovative measures to prevent school dropouts; raising awareness concerning human rights instruments; organizing campaigns regarding rights and responsibilities; advocating for housing and land rights; networking with (other) Governments and non-governmental organizations; raising moral and ethical consciousness; forming structures for children to build their capacity and enabling them to become agents of social change; celebrating international days; promoting interfaith dialogue in conflict situations; promoting gender balance; encouraging the revitalization of (the) local indigenous cultures through the arts; helping to reduce the social stigma experienced by people living with HIV/AIDS; empowering youth by exploring ways in which their actions at the local level can create a change for the better, and enabling improved job opportunities for them; working among persons who are physically and mentally challenged; delivering resources to communities overlooked by conventional outlets and ensuring that all investments produce a social gain or benefit; and ensuring maternal and child health.

3. Working among the marginalized people of society, we encounter many hurdles to promoting a society of "equality, development and peace".[2] Our members enumerate the following impediments: the absence of inclusive participatory structures linked to decision-making; the failure to recognize the right of all people to participate in decisions which affect their lives; the failure to promote the regeneration and empowerment of local communities; stigma and discrimination in the areas of gender, caste, culture, religion, illness, illiteracy and disability; the high incidence of women having no financial and economic status and, as such, being dependent on men; and negligence towards the girl child in the form of female infanticide and feticide, abandonment, child marriage and school dropout rates among girls. Others include: the lack of basic amenities and infrastructure; the unequal distribution of wealth; lack of access to quality education; the lack of birth registrations and subsequent cases of people living without citizenship; communication difficulties; the culture of violence; economic stress; the number of undocumented immigrants; family disintegration; corruption at all levels; the lack of local investment in the national economic structure; the outsourcing of jobs;

[1] www.ipa.ozehosting.com.

[2] *Agreed Conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women on the Critical Areas of Concern of the Beijing Platform for Action 1996-2005* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.06.IV.3).

instances of land-grabbing, the unbridled exploitation of natural resources at the expense of local communities; consumerism and the loss of a spiritual sensitivity.

4. The empowerment of women is the main focus of the Beijing Platform for Action. Knowledge is power. Basic education and legal empowerment of the vulnerable protects people from poverty, discrimination, violence and insecurity. In order to remove impediments and to enable the active participation of women and girls in decisions that affect their lives, they need to have legal knowledge and inclusion in participatory structures to ensure that they are able to exercise their rights and responsibilities.

5. In the words of Irene Khan, Secretary-General of Amnesty International:

> Human rights are guaranteed by international law and it is through laws that a state assigns and apportions the duties that must be met to give effect to human rights. Laws are an essential step in enforcing rights. ... Good laws, fairly administered, can transform societies ... I believe that the best way to do that is to empower people to claim their rights and to engage with the institutions that set and administer laws. This approach is called legal empowerment. It is a bottom-up effort to arm those living in poverty with knowledge of their rights so that they can effectively engage with official institutions.[3]

6. The International Presentation Association makes the following recommendations, asking that Governments:

(a) Provide education so that people can understand the different human rights instruments and how they can be used to benefit individuals and communities in order that policies that promote human dignity do not stay on paper. Put monitoring mechanisms in place to disclose policies to the concerned people;

(b) Ensure a bottom-up education process which provides women and girls with knowledge of their rights so that they are empowered to engage with legal institutions;

(c) Introduce forums for political, social, religious and economic decision-making to grass-roots levels by means of local consultative and inclusive neighbourhood organizations.[4] It is imperative that such forums remain small, face-to-face and community-based at every level so that the voices of the marginalized and/or weak do not get drowned out and lost, and thus go unheard, and that the people living in poverty remain voiceless. Ensure that such neighbourhood forums are federated at various levels of governance for wider reach and impact;

(d) Promote partnerships of women, children, youth, people with disabilities, indigenous people, older people and migrants through their community-based neighbourhood forums so that all are involved in the process of becoming active citizens;

(e) Develop national policies to ensure the protection of the fundamental rights and basic living conditions of internally displaced people, in particular maternal and child health from conception. Treaties or agreements on the respect for and dignified treatment of immigrants are essential. Laws/regulations/government

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[3] Irene Khan, *The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human Rights* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2009).

[4] www.ncnworld.org.

information should be available in various languages and/or be made available through translation services;

(f) Ensure microfinancing for vulnerable people, enabling sustainable livelihood security across the world. The situation and the needs of vulnerable groups need to be recognized in government policies. Over-indebted people need to be guaranteed access to basic banking services; financial education and advice should be developed; and the social responsibility of financial institutions should be encouraged and monitored;

(g) Ensure that women, who are engaged in every sector of life, are equally represented at all levels of bureaucracy and in government departments in order that there may be a proper balance of men and women in the workplace.

Note: The present statement is endorsed by the Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.